

Daughter Katie is getting married in nine months. Katie currently lives and works in California but was back to visit last week. Part of what she is doing during her visit is worry about some of the details of the wedding such as making sure they met with the parish priest, talk to florists and bakers for the wedding cake. The wedding cake is where I come in.

Now for my own wedding almost 30 years ago, I am sure I was asked for my opinion about things like flowers and cake. I am just as sure that my opinion was that if my lovely bride liked it, then I would surely like it. My attitude really hasn't changed in the last 30 years, and I trust that my wife and daughter will make great decisions regarding those important parts of the wedding. But they did something that surprised me. They brought home cupcake samples from each of the two people they met with, and wanted the rest of us to taste them and give our opinion.

Even though I am trying to lose weight, I was happy to offer my opinions and dive into all of that flour and sugary goodness. Katie and Joanne had already tried a bite of a couple of the cupcakes with one of the bakers, so there were about nine different flavored cupcakes for the six of us who were around the table. More than enough, even with two teenage boys sitting at the table.

When we sat down to taste the different varieties we were faced with the dilemma of trying to cut a normal sized cupcake into six equal slices. Actually I found out the hard way that it is virtually impossible to cut a normal sized cupcake into six equal slices using a normal kitchen knife, or any other knife that we own. So we cut them into fourths and some of us ate half of the fourth, which was plenty.

As I was eating through my 1/8th bite of the next to last cupcake, I thought that it was amazing that we are actually doing this. There was no commitment given by either Katie or Joanne to purchase the wedding cake from either vendor. Yet they were willing to send home six of the most delicious cupcakes in an attempt to sell a significantly larger amount of wedding cake. Was that what the wedding cake business has come to? Giving away what I assume are very expensive samples? Is that crazy or a good sales practice?

I subscribe to a weekly e-mail from sales guru Jeffrey Gitomer. Mr. Gitomer often touts that in order to gain a potential client's trust and future business, the salesperson should often come bearing a gift. Either a referral for the potential client or a sample of their product. By allowing us to take the cupcakes home, the bakers were allowing us to place their product side by side against others they were competing against. A brave, bold move.

Today I challenge you to give a sample of your product to potential clients. Let your product stand next to, and beat the competition. Now I know what you are thinking..."Tom, you work at a bank and your product is money, I'll be right over for some samples!" Not so fast. You see while my product is money, what makes my money different from other banks is the service you get when you walk in the door. Just like every other service company.

In the end, one baker's cupcakes stood head and shoulders above the other. It wasn't just my opinion; it was the opinion of the most important people in the room that mattered; the bride, the groom and the mother of the bride.

Small Business Today is a bi-weekly feature written by Tom Friedman, market president of First National Bank, Ames-Ankeny.